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Young Captain Tom Drake

OR,

In Search of the Pirates' Home.

By the Author of "Captain Tom Drake," "Privateer Tom," "Young Tom Drake," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

YOUNG CAPTAIN TOM STARTS ON A CRUISE.

"FAREWELL, dearest Claire. Duty calls and I must answer, but keep up a brave heart and ere long I will return and clasp you once more in my arms."

"Not farewell, my husband, for farewells are given only when one expects never to return."

"And I shall return, and you are right—as you always are. For the present only, then, we part."

"Can you not take me with you?"

"Hardly," answered the handsome young naval officer with a smile, as he looked into the eyes of his beautiful wife. "I am going into danger, and as I have sworn to protect you, taking you into battle with me is scarcely the way to do it."

"Harry goes with you, of course?"

"Beyond a doubt. Harry is second in command of the Viking and you know that we are inseparable."

"Then Madge and I will have to console one another until you return."

"You and she are as close friends as Vere and myself, and one is never far from the other."

"That must have been why Harry married her, Tom," answered the lady with a merry laugh.

"I presume so; but now I must go, so one kiss more and I am gone."

Young Captain Tom Drake—he was but a little over twenty-one—was as brave a lad as ever drew breath, and the greater the danger the more eager he was to meet it.

He was the son of a celebrated naval hero—the famous Captain Tom Drake who had rendered such efficient aid to the American cause in two wars, besides having a most brilliant reputation as a soldier of fortune in other lands than his own.

Tom was a true son of this hero, and, being now a captain and owning a gallant ship, his ambition to achieve great deeds was only whetted.

He had been married scarcely a year to the beautiful Claire Harcourt, his friend and first officer, Harry Vere, the son of Tom's father's dearest friend, having wedded, at the same time, the lovely Madge, Claire's cousin and boon companion.

There was no war at this time, but the government, having heard of the depredations of a certain noted pirate upon the southern coast, volunteers had been called for to go in search of the freebooter, drive him to his lair and destroy him forever.

Young Tom Drake had been the first to answer this call and his ship, purchased by his own private fortune, had been put in commission at once.

After parting with his wife, Tom hurried to the harbor, where a boat was waiting for him, pulled by six lusty tars, and in a few minutes he

was on board his beautiful vessel, the *Viking*, which only awaited his arrival to set sail.

"Harry, my boy," said Tom, to his first officer, as the two met in the cabin, "there are lively times before us once more."

"Yes, indeed. Do you know what I have heard?"

"No, of course not."

"That our old shipmate, Clifford, has, through influence, been appointed to the command of a ship, the *Vigilant*, and that he means to take the wind out of our sails."

"How so?"

"Why, he means to capture this pirate himself."

Captain Tom laughed merrily and then replied:

"He has never forgiven me my getting ahead of him at the time we drove Redbeard, the pirate, from the seas."

"By the way, you have never heard of our old enemy, Watson, who was first officer on the *Valiant* at that very time?"

"Not since his escape, but I suppose that, like a bad penny, he will turn up again some time."

"Yes, in time for the hangman to turn him off, I suppose. He was as bad as Redbeard himself."

"Quite as bad, if not worse. But come, we must get under weigh at once."

The boatswain's pipe rang merrily through the ship, calling all hands to quarters, and a scene of bustling though systematic activity followed.

The anchor was weighed, the sails unfurled, the colors run up, and then with a hearty cheer from her gallant crew, the noble ship glided out of the bay, and out upon the waters of the broad ocean.

A shot from shore now rang out as a token of parting from Tom's many friends, and once more the brave fellows on board gave a lusty cheer and waved their hats as the land rapidly receded.

Up forward a group of sailors were engaged in an earnest conversation, the men having served under Young Captain Tom on a former voyage.

"It's like that we'll have plenty o' fun afore the v'y'ge is out, Ike, my man," said one bronzed and heavily bearded sea-dog.

"Right you are, mate, and the v'y'ge starts off as I like to see un."

"Couldn't be better, Ike, and by this time to-morrow we ought to be raising the Florida coast."

"So we will, Hawser, lad, if all goes well, and I think it will. The breeze is right, and the ship rides like a gal in her holiday finery."

"They do say, Ike, my man, that Mars Clifford, him as was middy along o' Young Tom, has already got a start."

"Ahead of us, Hawser?" put in a third member of the group.

"Ay, Mr. Mizzen, ahead of us; but that don't say that she'll stay ahead of us. It only wants that our youngster knows she is ahead, to clap on all sail and overhaul Mars Clifford in a jiffy."

"Ay, that we will," said Ike Bolt, the boatswain; "and it won't be the first time that our Tom has overhauled him, neither."

During the next forenoon, Hawser, who was on the lookout, descried a sail at a considerable distance ahead, and reported the same to Harry Vere, who was on deck at the time.

"What do you make her out to be, my man?" asked Harry.

"Can't tell yet, sir. Can only see her topsails, but I only see two sticks."

"Take him up a glass," said Harry to the cabin boy, handing a small telescope to the lad.

Presently, after scanning the stranger through the glass for some moments, Hawser called down:

"She looks like a brig, sir, but I can't see her hull yet."

"Well, keep your eye on her, my man, and report as soon as you can."

"Aye—aye, sir!"

Young Tom Drake presently came on deck, and he and Harry conversed respecting the stranger, Tom declaring it to be his belief that the latter was probably a merchantman or small trader.

At the end of half an hour Hawser shouted down:

"Below there!"

"Aye—aye!" answered Harry.

"I make yon out to be an armed brig. She's tacked just now and is coming for us at a canter."

"Down from aloft."

"Aye—aye, sir!"

"Did she fly any colors?" asked Tom, as Hawser stepped on deck.

"No, sir, but she's Yankee built, sure enough."

"I have it," said Tom to Harry. "That is Clifford's vessel, the *Vigilant*."

"Likely enough," said Harry. "What can he mean, though, by retracing his course?"

"So as to be in safe company, most likely," answered Tom, with a laugh.

Young Clifford, who was but a year or so older than Tom, had been a midshipman with the latter during his last voyage. Showing a most overbearing disposition when suddenly promoted to the command of the ship, making himself most obnoxious to Tom as well as others.

If, as rumored, he was now in command of a vessel in search of the pirate, his crew would be obliged to serve the veriest martinet that ever lived and life would be scarcely worth living.

At the end of another hour the two vessels were in speaking distance, when a hail came from the smaller one.

"Ahoy! Send your captain aboard. I wish to advise him."

"Well, of all things," laughed Harry.

"Who commands the brig?" asked Tom, the American flag being now displayed upon both vessels.

"Captain Clifford, United States Navy. What ship is that?"

"The *Viking*, privateer, Captain Tom Drake."

"Captain Clifford says you must come aboard and take orders."

Tom's face flushed for an instant and then, turning to Harry he said quietly:

"I like that. Must is a big word, but it is not every one who knows how to use it."

"The fellow is the same overbearing upstart as ever," muttered Vere. "What answer shall you make him?"

"Tell Captain Clifford," shouted Tom through a trumpet, "that if he desires to see Captain Tom Drake, the younger, he must come aboard."

In a few moments both vessels were lying to and almost near enough to jump from one to the other.

An officer in a glittering uniform now stepped upon the quarter deck and said:

"Captain Drake, I have instructions to take your vessel under my orders in this chase. Come aboard at once, sir, and receive them."

"Captain Clifford," said Tom, "this is my own vessel, I am sailing under letters of marque and not under government orders. If you need protection, I shall be glad to have you sail in company with us, but I take orders from no one."

"This is a government vessel, sir," returned Clifford, angrily, "and if you do not obey me I will fire upon you."

"Do so at your peril," said Tom. "Mr. Vere, tack ship."

"All hands stand by to tack ship!" cried Harry. "All hands to stations."

In another moment the orders were given and obeyed, the *Viking* once more proceeding on her course.

"Do you think he'll fire?" asked Harry, as the *Vigilant* was seen to tack and follow after the *Viking*.

"No. That is all bombast. The fellow wishes to show his authority, but he has evidently forgotten with whom he has to deal."

The gallant ship then sped upon her way, and in the course of two or three hours the brig was left far behind.

"Guess the gov'ment hasn't much confidence in that fellow," said Ike Bolt to Hawser. "They've given him the slowest vessel in the service. She'd never come up with the pirates 'less they was aground."

"He's a nasty kind o' chap, anyway," answered Hawser, "and we may have trouble with him yet. Them airy chaps hate a snub wuss'n rats hate a leaky ship."

CHAPTER II.

THE PIRATE AT WORK—THE CHASE.

THREE days following the meeting with the brig, the man on lookout, on board the *Viking*, was suddenly alarmed, just before daybreak, by hearing the sound of firing in the distance.

First there was seen a dull red flash a point or two off the lee bow, and then followed a report.

This was repeated in a few moments, the flash being brighter and the report louder than before.

The officer of the watch, who was the second mate, now hurried to the waist and said:

"Call the boatswain, and one of you go below and arouse the captain. We must know what this means."

At that instant the firing in the distance was renewed, and simultaneously Captain Tom appeared on deck.

"Ah, sir, good-morning," said the officer. "I was about to send for you."

"How long has this firing been going on?" asked Tom.

"Scarcely two minutes. Ah! There it is again."

"Call all hands to make sail," said Tom, quickly. "There is some foul work going on here, and we must discover what it is."

The boatswain's pipe now resounded through the ship, and the men were at their posts in an instant.

There was a light breeze blowing at this time, and all the canvas that the vessel could take was now crowded upon her.

Her speed was at once increased, and the men set up a shout as the spray began to dash up from the cutwater, the wind whistling and singing through the taut shrouds.

"What do you suppose it is, Tom?" asked Harry at the young captain's elbow.

"That accursed pirate at work, beyond a doubt," cried Tom.

"By Jove, look there!" muttered Harry.

As he spoke a great tongue of flame rushed up from the surface of the sea, as it were, and by its light two vessels could be seen about five miles distant.

One was a bark, clumsily built and heavily laden, while the other appeared to be a schooner, low, long and very speedy, her tapering masts being seen beyond the bark.

"She's on fire!" muttered Tom. "We may not save her but at any rate we will give this villain a chase."

Fiercer arose the flames, while dense masses of smoke poured up and floated away in heavy clouds to leeward.

There was no more firing now, but, by the brilliant light which now illuminated the scene, several boats could be seen in the water, some rowing away, others hanging about the burning vessel.

The *Viking* was now rushing through the water at the rate of eight knots an hour, and rapidly nearing the scene of the conflict.

As the day broke she was but a mile away, and a shot was fired, without effect of course.

It did have one effect, however, for the schooner was now observed to be pulling away from the bark and crowding on all sail.

The sky grew lighter every minute, and just before sunrise the flames grew paler and suddenly went out, as the unfortunate bark lifted up her bows and plunged into the sea.

As the sun arose the black flag was seen floating from the schooner's peak, while a shot of defiance rushed from her stern chasers on deck.

The sea was strewn with fragments of the wreck, but not a man could be seen, though one or two empty boats were passed in the course of a few minutes.

In the distance, low down upon the horizon, could be seen a faint bluish line, which the sailors knew to be land, and toward this the schooner was now making.

At that time the two vessels seemed to be about equally matched as to speed, the distance between them neither increasing nor diminishing.

In case the wind abated somewhat, however, the schooner would have the advantage, being able to sail in a lighter breeze than the ship.

"I'm looking for a gale, Ike Bolt," muttered Hawser, up forward.

"Ay, lad, and one that'll tear that dirty rag yon into boot laces. He's the man we want, or, if he isn't, he's one o' the same serpent's breed, and the sooner we put our heel on his head the better."

"Right enough, Ike Bolt, but the fellow knows how to sail."

"So does young Cap'n Tom," grunted the boatswain, as he arose and walked aft.

The men were now given their breakfast, and after partaking of a hasty meal, Tom went on deck and ordered everything removed which would at all interfere with the speed of his ship, the sails being well wetted in order to make them draw better.

The pirate schooner was bounding like a bird over the waves, while now and then a shot was fired, in pure bravado, Tom paying no attention to it.

The ship was steadily lowering the lead of the schooner, the wind being favorable, and at last, in the middle of the forenoon, the two were scarce half a mile apart.

A shot was now fired from the Viking which struck the top of the starboard rail, tearing away a portion of it and bounding against the main shrouds, whence it fell into the sea.

"Send another one, a little to port, and we'll disable him," said Tom to the gunner.

At that instant, however, the schooner altered her position, and, almost at the same time, the wind was observed to be decreasing in force.

At the end of ten minutes the pirate had increased her lead slightly, but as the wind was still going down the chances were greatly in her favor.

"A stern chase is a long one," mused Tom, "and I am not beaten yet. I will follow this bird of prey to his nest, if necessary, for I am determined to do what I can to rid the ocean of these pests."

By noon the schooner was a mile ahead and steadily gaining, the land being now easily visible about twenty miles ahead.

"She is evidently bound for those islands," mused Tom, "and it is among them that the pirate evidently has his hiding-place."

"We must not let her reach them if we can help it," added Harry.

"That is true enough, but I am afraid we cannot. The wind is dying out fast."

In another hour the schooner had still further increased her lead, and seemed to be making for a point between two of the islands, there being quite a group of them at this spot.

Tom hurried below, examined the chart and said, thoughtfully:

"None of these islands could accommodate as many men as the pirate must have. He has his lair somewhere else, and this is but a ruse to lead me off the scent."

Returning to the deck young Captain Tom gave orders to have the ship's course changed, so as to round the point of the largest island and not attempt to follow the schooner.

"I am afraid that there isn't water enough in that channel," he explained to Harry, "and besides, we do not know its turnings and might easily run upon the rocks."

"You think that this fellow intends merely to run between the islands and so increase his lead on us?"

"Yes, and he will do so, of course, but the chase is not over yet."

As the Viking went upon the other tack there was barely wind enough to propel them, the yards being hauled around so as to catch all the breeze there was.

Before they reached the islands the wind died down completely, and, to make matters worse, a heavy fog began to arise.

This soon shut out all view of the shore, and Tom ordered soundings to be taken, finding that they were in four fathoms with the water rapidly shoaling.

Just as the fog had settled down Hawser, from aloft, had seen the pirate schooner glide into the channel between two of the islands disappear.

"They are no better off than we are," mused Tom, when this was told him, "and but for this fog I might have been able to warp around to the other side of this island, and so see them when they came out."

Now that there was danger of running aground, and the next cast of the lead showed but two and one-half fathoms, with a strong tide setting towards the point, Tom determined to drop the anchor at once.

"I almost wish I had a small vessel like Clifford's," he said to Harry, as they sat in the cabin after the ship had come to a halt. "We must catch this fellow on the open sea, if anywhere, for we can never follow him into the holes and corners he will be likely to take to."

"There are the boats," said Vere quietly, but Tom made no reply.

The islands formed a part of the Florida group and were hardly large enough to serve as habitations for men, being, besides, but poorly provided with the necessities of life.

They had merely proved of use to the pirate in getting away from his persistent foe, as a close encounter between the two vessels was not to be thought of for a moment.

The fog hung thick and heavy over sea and land and seemed to have a most depressing effect upon the sailors who were usually in the best of spirits.

It lasted until after dark, and then a breeze sprang up, and in a short time every vestige of it was swept away, the moon shining full and clear in the heavens.

The anchor was raised, and the Viking stood off from shore, rounding the end of the island with room to spare and scudding straight away to the southward.

Nothing could be seen of the schooner, and Tom determined to anchor again, and send a boat ashore to explore the island in case he did not discover the pirate on the water.

"There's a bit of fog to the s'uthard of us yet, cap'n," said Ike Bolt, "and maybe when we get clear o' that we'll see this fellow again."

As they kept on the fog cleared, and in a little while Hawser went aloft with a glass to see if he might discover any sign of the enemy.

He had been there for fully half an hour, when he shouted to those below:

"Sail ho! dead ahead, a good six mile, looks like the same fellow we chased."

"They must have slipped through the channel and gotten away in the fog," mused Tom, "and there we were lying idle instead of following them up."

"Six miles or even ten is not such a long lead on the open sea with this wind blowing," said Harry. "We ought to overhaul them by morning."

"If we had the open sea before us I would not fret," said Tom. "I am afraid of these islands, which may form a retreat for many more buccaneers than this one. However, we will push on."

The wind blew fair and strong all night, and at sunrise Ike Bolt called Tom, who had only gone to sleep after being up nearly half the night.

"There's something you might like to see, sir," said Ike, as Tom sprang up.

The young commander grasped his sword and a telescope and hurried to the deck.

Hurrying forward, he stood well up in the bows, pointed his sword out to sea, and cried in a ringing voice:

"There, my brave boys, is our enemy all ready for us. The villain shows his teeth at last."

The pirate schooner was seen in the distance, her colors flying, all her ports open, and her decks cleared for action, ready to keep up a running fight with her determined enemy.

A shot came presently whizzing over the water, falling far short of the ship, but Captain Tom's brave men set up a shout at this and all hands wished that the fight might begin at once.

"Ay! let them bark," cried Tom, "but brave dogs never show their teeth and then run. Crowd on all sail, my hearties, and we'll overtake them yet."

CHAPTER III.

A RUNNING FIGHT—AMONG THE REEFS—THE CREEK.

"WELL, Master Ike Bolt, guess our friend yonder does not want to fight as much as we thought he did," said Hawser to the boatswain a few minutes later.

This was apparent by the movements of the schooner, which now crowded on all sail and sped away on a new tack, one which gave her more headway than before.

The Viking had gained considerably upon the schooner during the night, and it was evident that if the pursuit were kept up, they would soon overtake the pirate.

The latter went off without firing a shot, the ship following about three miles behind.

All the morning the pursuit was continued, the ship slowly but steadily gaining upon the enemy.

Finally, in the middle of the afternoon watch, Tom judged that the pirate was within reach, and ordered the guns to be manned.

The first shot fell short, but the second fell upon the schooner's quarter-deck and caused considerable havoc.

A third shot carried away a part of the weather-rail, and a fourth smashed a boat on the main deck.

The pirate now answered from her stern-chasers, firing several rounds without doing any great damage.

Finally, however, an immense solid shot came hurtling through the air and carried away the end of the flying-jibboom, causing the ship to lose her headway, the outer jib flapping uselessly from the loosened stay.

Tom bit his lips in a rage, and directed a shot to be fired close to the water-line of the schooner.

The ship gave a violent lurch just as the piece was discharged, however, and the shot struck the taffrail, causing two or three to fall into the sea, where they were left to drown as the schooner scudded away, after firing another shot, which struck the ship's bowsprit, tore out a huge splinter and fell into the sea.

The delay in fishing a new boom for the flying-jib enabled the schooner to increase her lead, and by the time the Viking was once more in pursuit, the wind began to die down again.

Not until after dark was there more than a capful of wind, but then the sky suddenly darkened, immense masses of clouds swept up from the horizon, the waves increased to a terrible height, and the gale broke upon the ship with awful force.

Only enough sail was kept up to steady the ship, which kept straight on her course, following the schooner whose position was carefully noted and reported to young Captain Tom from time to time.

Occasionally the air would be so full of flying spray and mist that it was impossible to see the fugitive.

At intervals, however, she could be made out, scurrying along in the distance under reduced sail, her principal desire seeming to be to escape from her resolute and determined foe.

All night the gale howled and churned the sea into long lines of foam, and all night the pursuit was kept up, neither vessel gaining or losing.

The sky was as black as ink, but now and again, at long intervals, a flash would come from out the pitchy darkness and reveal the schooner, still hurrying on, and doing her utmost to escape.

Just before daybreak the gale abated much of its fury, though the waves still ran high and reared their foaming crests in anger at the rash mortals who dared to brave their dangers.

When the sun arose the schooner was seen making all haste toward an island at a considerable distance, the shining beach, fortress-like shores and green clad hills of which made it especially noticeable.

When they were within ten miles of the island, which seemed to be one of a large group, the sailors observed that there was a long line of reefs half a mile from shore over which the sea broke in fury.

The schooner headed straight for the reefs, but presently passed through, and rode in safety on the comparatively still water beyond the breakers.

Tom scanned the shore narrowly through a glass, to see if there were any good opening for his vessel in the reefs, seeing none however.

"We can go around them and enter at the point where the reefs cease," he said. "It will delay us, but that does not matter."

However, it was not such an easy matter to find a safe channel beyond the reefs, for there were dangerous shoals, sunken rocks and

whirling eddies, which even the stoutest ship might dread to enter.

The schooner had, in the meantime, dropped anchor in a little bay in front of a narrow stretch of white beach, above which arose a range of steep hills, and flanked upon either side by cliffs which shot up straight from the water's edge to a height of a thousand feet.

After many soundings had been taken and several attempts made to get into the quiet waters behind the reefs, a boat was lowered, commanded by Vere and containing Bolt, Hawser and two others.

The intention was to search for a channel, through which the ship might be towed, but after many vain attempts the task was given up.

All this time, the schooner, secure from attack or even approach, lay quietly at anchor in the little bay, not a soul being seen upon her decks.

Finally, an hour or two past noon, a good anchorage was found upon another side of the island, in a little bay almost land-locked, but where the shore was so precipitous that no attempt was made to land.

Here the vessel was brought to an anchor, and the boat party went aboard, the boat being left towing astern.

"We have found as good a retreat as the pirate himself," said Tom, as he and Harry sat down to dinner, "for, although there is no chance to land on the island where we are, we are out of sight, and might easily be thought to have left."

"And then," answered Harry, "if we can't follow this cut-throat with the ship, we have our boats, and can send our whole force after him."

"Which is what I propose to do after a reconnoisance," said Tom, quietly. "We have chased the villain to his home, and now we must rout him out of and destroy it, so that no others of the accursed trade may ever seek shelter in it."

The bay, as has been said, was almost entirely shut in by the land, and had doubtless proved a hiding-place for buccaneers on more than one occasion.

It was, perhaps, a quarter of a mile in length by half that in width, the entrance being between two precipitous cliffs which towered far above the water.

It had ⁸ been discovered by accident by the boat party, and from the outside, at a distance of a few hundred feet, would not be noticed on account of the way in which one cliff jutted out shutting off the view of the inside.

Here no storms could intrude, and a vessel might ride safely at anchor within its shores though a gale might be blowing without.

It was not likely that the pirates would trouble them here, but, for the sake of safety, Tom ordered a boat to be stationed at the entrance to give warning in case of an attack by the pirates.

It was nearly evening when the Viking glided into this safe retreat, and by the time the men had had their suppers it was quite dark, the sky being clouded with now and then a star or the edge of the moon peeping out for a moment.

Tom had formed a plan since entering the little harbor, and he now consulted with Harry as how best to carry it out.

The result of the consultation was that at ten o'clock or a little later a boat left the entrance of the little bay and proceeded toward the channel between the reefs and the larger island.

It contained Tom Drake, Harry Vere, Ike Bolt, Hawser and six sturdy seamen, all well armed and ready for any emergency.

The boat was rowed silently and at an easy pace out into the main channel and then toward the bay within the reefs.

While the ship might not be taken through, there was no trouble with the boat, and presently the cliffs outlined themselves against the sky, the gentle lapping of the waves telling where the beach was.

At that moment the moon came out for an instant and lighted up the bay, the beach and the cliffs, disappearing again in a moment.

"She has gone!" whispered Tom. "We have allowed the rascals to escape again while we waited idly."

"Perhaps the villain knows another harbor similar to the one where we left the ship," suggested Harry.

"Perhaps, though there doesn't seem to be an opening large enough to admit even a boat."

"Let us pull along close to the cliff, and perhaps we shall find one."

The moon appeared again at that moment, and the boat shot quickly in under the shadow of the cliff, so as to be invisible to any chance night prowler that might be around.

It was clear enough that the schooner was not at anchor in the bay, for its whole extent was now flooded with the light of the moon, which illuminated the opposite cliff and showed plainly that the vessel was not lying alongside.

She was not on the other side either, for the boat kept on undisturbed till nearly to the beach.

"H'sh!" said Harry. "What is that?"

"Sounds like water running into the bay."

"Perhaps there is a creek here."

"Yes, I had thought of that. Pull along slowly, so that we may look for it. Perhaps the mouth is concealed by underbrush."

The boat was rowed slowly and steadily, quite close to the rocks, till Tom suddenly whispered to the men to rest on their oars.

"Here it is, I think," he said, reaching out and grasping a bush on shore.

Pulling upon this he swung the bow of the boat around until it entered an opening in the face of the cliff, ten feet or more in height and more than wide enough to allow the boat to pass.

Releasing his hold upon the bush Tom ordered the men to pull slowly, and in a moment they were in the midst of the most profound darkness.

"Stop a moment," said Tom, quietly. "Has any one a tinder-box? We must see what this place is like before we proceed any further."

"I have one, sir," said Ike Bolt, who sat in the bows.

"Ah, is that you, boatswain? Get us a light, then, as quick as possible."

There were a few sharp clicks, a gentle puffing of the breath and then a tiny flame appeared, Ike Bolt having lighted a match tipped with sulphur at the little mass of burning tow.

The wood presently ignited, and the boat was seen to be in a vaulted passage twenty or thirty feet high, and extending apparently into the very bowels of the earth.

"This is one of the dens where this wolf hides," muttered Tom. "Now to explore it."

CHAPTER IV.

EXPLORING THE CREEK—THE VAULTED PASSAGE—A STARTLING ENCOUNTER.

THE men now pulled steadily up the little creek and had gone perhaps seven or eight hundred feet when the bow suddenly grated upon a sandy beach, which shelved upwards quite abruptly.

"We have come to the end of the passage," whispered Tom. "I thought it must be longer."

"I can feel running water on this side," said Harry, "and it is fresh. I don't know why I thought to taste it."

"Fresh!" repeated Tom. "Then it comes from somewhere in the interior of the island. Show a light there, Bolt."

"There's a lantern in the locker, sir," said the boatswain. "Had I better light it?"

"Yes; it is safe enough here, I suppose."

In a few moments the lantern was lighted and held over the side of the boat.

Where they had paused there appeared to be a regular landing place, a short flight of stone steps leading, upon the left, to a vaulted passage above and alongside the stream for a short distance, when it turned sharply and was lost in the gloom.

Straight ahead the stream continued as far as they could see, being now shallow and bubbling and foaming over the shining pebbles, while here and there it was quite deep.

"The stream is not navigable the rest of the way," said Tom, musingly, "and so they have made a landing place here."

"There seems to be a ledge running by its side along the face of the passage," said Harry. "It is wide enough to walk upon, and as smooth as glass."

"I have no desire to follow the brook," said Tom, suddenly, "but I think that this other passage leads somewhere."

"A cavern among the rocks?" suggested Harry.

"Yes, and I propose to explore it. Do you remain here, Harry, and I will take a couple of men with me and see whither it leads."

"Why not all of us?"

"Because I would rather not leave the boat alone. Somebody might come along that ledge while we were absent."

"You are right," muttered Vere.

"Remain here then," resumed Tom, "and if anything occurs to alarm you, give me a signal, and I will hasten back."

"You will want a light?"

"Yes; I will take the lantern, as you will not need it. Hawser and Bolt, I will want you."

"Aye—aye, sir," said the men, quietly, as they stepped ashore after their young commander.

Seeing that his sword and pistols were ready to his hand, Tom took his lantern and led the way up the stone steps and along the passage.

"It's like going into a rat hole, sir," muttered Hawser.

"Yes, but do not speak too loud, for I fancy that these smooth walls will carry any sound we may make as in a trumpet."

"Well, we've gone in at the big end of the horn," chuckled Ike Bolt, "and it's to be hoped we don't come out at the little one."

"Sh! Silence!" said Tom, as the passage now made an abrupt turn.

The three adventurers now proceeded for about a hundred feet, when the passage again made an abrupt turn, at the same time sloping upward so greatly as to make frequent landing places or steps necessary.

"Queer place this," muttered Bolt. "I wonder is it natural, or did them rats dig it out?"

"As likely they dragged their vessel in here as that," growled Hawser. "Do use a little bit o' sense, Ike Bolt."

"Well, folks has cut caverns out o' the solid rock afore this," retorted Ike. "Look at the big caves in—"

"Sh!" said Tom sharply. "Not another word."

Then all three stood glued to the wall as the sound of boisterous laughter came floating along the passage from some point beyond.

"This leads to a cavern where the men are assembled rejoicing over their escape," mused Tom. "I must discover it if I can."

Then bidding his two comrades wait for him where they were and not to speak unless he first addressed them, young Captain Tom went on alone, flashing the light along the path as he walked.

He had taken another turn which hid him completely from his followers, had ascended half a dozen steps and was hurrying along the mysterious passage when he suddenly heard a sound in front of him which brought the hot blood rushing to his temples.

Footsteps sounded on the stone floor, together with the voice of a man humming some wild drinking song.

Some one was approaching, and, in fact, was almost upon him.

To conceal the lantern under his cloak and stand as close against the wall as he could was the work of an instant.

Had he been a part of the wall itself, he could not have adhered more closely, and a stone image was as devoid of breath or motion as he.

He had taken his precautions none too soon, for, at that moment the footsteps sounded more distinct, and then a man came staggering along the passage, singing the refrain of an old song.

Tom's heart stood still, for he feared that the man might collide with him and his presence there be discovered.

There was no time to draw his sword and the movement would have been heard, and so Tom stood there awaiting a crisis with no little anxiety.

The man was evidently intoxicated, for his voice was thick and husky, and his breath redolent with the fumes of strong drink, while his walk was most uncertain.

He staggered against the wall just opposite Tom and uttered a grunt as his song was interrupted, and then our hero expected nothing but that the recoil would send the fellow against him.

By a rare good chance, however, the man reeled on and did not strike the wall till he had passed several feet beyond where Tom stood.

"He will meet Hawser and Bolt," thought the young fellow. "Well, they will probably take good care of him, so I have nothing to fear from that quarter."

Tom waited until the sound of the inebriate's feet and voice became less distinct and then, taking the lantern from under his cloak, proceeded to follow up the passage.

"This is doubtless the pirate's retreat or rendezvous," he mused, "but I would like to know where the fellow has taken his vessel. As Hawser said, it is not likely that he has carried it in here with him."

Just then the sound of noisy laughter was heard again and Tom paused, wondering if any more of the pirates were coming that way.

The sound was distant, however, and Tom reasoned that it must come from the cavern he was seeking.

At the end of a few more paces he suddenly came to a solid oaken door barring his further progress.

Stooping down he listened intently for any sound from the other side, but heard none.

Then, examining the door more closely by the aid of his lantern, he saw that it opened from him and was slightly ajar.

Pushing it slowly and gently, he gradually widened the opening, and could see that there was a light in the chamber beyond.

Putting the lantern in a natural niche in the wall, and covering it with his cloak, Tom now drew his sword, listening intently the while, and began slowly pushing back the heavy door.

Once or twice it creaked upon its massive hinges, and at such times Tom felt a shiver run down his back.

It is no disgrace to any man to be afraid, for the bravest men will feel fear at times, but, although Tom had certain misgivings, he nevertheless resolved to follow this adventure to the end.

He could see that the light in the passage or chamber beyond was evidently produced by a suspended lamp and therefore reasoned that he was about to enter either the principal cavern or one leading to it.

At last, pushing the door open wide enough to admit of his passing, he clutched his drawn sword nervously and stepped forward.

He found himself in a vaulted cavern thirty feet or more in width with apparently no other means of exit than the one door.

At one side was a heavy oaken table, and above it, on the wall, a large shield of some shining metal.

Above the table, suspended by long chains from a projection above, was a bronze lamp and this was the only light in the chamber.

Seated at the table and in the shadow was a man dressed in a glittering uniform, his head bowed over a chart or map of some kind.

As Tom entered, the man suddenly looked up and Tom recognized him as Watson the former associate of Redbeard the pirate.

CHAPTER V

THE PIRATE'S PERIL—TOM A PRISONER—WATSON TRIES TO STRIKE A BARGAIN.

YES, the man was indeed Watson, Tom's former enemy, and now, as then, hand and glove with the pirates.

"So—so, we meet again?" cried Tom, grasping the sword more firmly. "It is some time, Mr. Watson, since I have had the great pleasure of gazing upon your ugly face."

"Spare your compliments," said the other, with an angry flush, and devote what little time you have in preparing for death, for die you shall, and that within the hour."

"Not by your hand, friend Watson," returned Tom. "You and I have an old score to settle, and it is quite time to put an end to your career of wickedness."

"Since you know me, and it is needless to deny myself," answered Watson, "you must remember that I am hard to kill, and that when once I swear vengeance against any one—"

"A truce to this," cried Tom, leaping forward. "Draw and defend yourself, villain, for I would not take even your worthless life without first giving you a chance to save it."

"Fool!" hissed Watson. "Your life is mine already, and you do but prate when you talk of killing me. Behold!"

With that the man sprang up and struck a tremendous blow upon the shield hanging just above his head on the wall.

The sonorous metal rang again, the sound echoing and re-echoing through the vaulted passages.

The reverberations had not died away when the tramp of hurrying footsteps was heard in many directions.

Doors, invisible before, suddenly flew open, and in less than half a minute fifty armed men had entered the cavern.

It needed but a glance to show Tom that he was surrounded, caught in a trap, and at the mercy of this man Watson.

The men stood in a circle surrounding Tom and Watson, their weapons in their hands and evidently only awaiting the word to fall upon the rash intruder and cut him to pieces.

"Well," laughed Watson, "what say you now, my fierce young bantam? Whose life is most in danger, mine or yours?"

Tom looked with an unflinching gaze upon his enemies, the number of whom, as he could see, was rapidly increasing.

"Was it necessary to call in so many to your aid?" he asked, with a curl of his lip. "Verily, you are well protected. Were it not better to place your hirelings in front of you, lest even now I might take your base life?"

"The cub speaks brave words, despite his desperate strait," whispered one of the pirates to his neighbor, "and I would that there might be a fight between him and the captain."

"Ay, mate, it would be a desperate one—but, hist! we will have work to do presently."

Watson's scarred cheeks flushed deeply at Tom's taunting retort, and he seemed scarce able to control himself.

"It is not I who need to screen myself behind my men," he said, "but you. Say what prayers you know, for your hour is at hand."

"Let me but fight hand to hand with you and kill you," cried Tom, "and I shall die well satisfied. Defend yourself, if you be not the veriest coward that ever crawled."

With that Tom hurled himself upon Watson, who was thus forced to fight, or be cut down by his impetuous antagonist.

The villain defended himself desperately, calling hoarsely to his men to seize Tom.

Although Tom was greatly excited, he nevertheless did not allow Watson to take him at a disadvantage, and watched the man's every movement.

Tom was no mean swordsman, and this Watson speedily discovered when a downward stroke of the young fellow's sword cut open his cheek, and would have split his skull had he not fallen back in time.

"Seize the young dog!" cried Watson. "Do not kill him, but take him alive."

"Not till I have killed you first, you cur!" hissed Tom, as he made a savage lunge at Watson.

The keen blade penetrated the man's flesh and struck against one of his ribs, that being the only thing that saved him from death.

With a frightful shriek the man fell upon his knees, cursing terribly, and at that instant the pirates closed in upon Tom and disarmed him, though not until several had received painful, if not serious, wounds.

"That's the sort of a leader we ought to have," said one of the pirates. "We would all fight better with such a man at our head."

Tom was now standing between two great bearded giants, who held his arms as in a vise.

His weapons were taken from him and placed upon the table, the men then apparently awaiting the commands of Watson whom Tom knew now to be the leader of the band.

Wiping the blood from his face Watson took his seat at the table, dispatched a boy for a bottle of liquor, and then looking fiercely at Tom, said savagely:

"So, Tom Drake, you have walked into the rat-hole, have you? Beware that the rats do not tear you to pieces."

"And do you beware, you worse than rat," cried Tom, furiously, "that the ferrets do not hunt you from your hole and shake out your worthless life."

"Beware!" hissed Watson, laying his hand upon his sword hilt. "Do not tempt me too far. I am disposed to save your life on certain terms which you will doubtless comply with, but do not impose too much upon my clemency or I might forget myself."

"Mr. Watson, or whatever you may call yourself now," said Tom, firmly, "you and I are enemies of old, and can be nothing else. I will never make terms with you. I have undertaken to hunt you down and put a stop to your nefarious practices, and I—"

"You will never do it!" hissed the other, half rising. "You, your ship and your crew are in my power now, but, to prevent bloodshed, I wish to propose a plan to you."

"I will not listen," said Tom.

"Deliver your vessel and men into my hands and your life and Vere's shall be spared, also such of the men as may choose to serve under me."

"Sooner may my ship be destroyed than be polluted by your presence!"

"Reflect upon it," laughed Watson. "As I tell you, you are in my power now, you and your ship, but I wish to avoid more bloodshed. Deliver up the ship and—"

"Betray the brave fellows who have joined their fortunes to mine!" cried Tom, in a burst of indignation. "No! Sooner wou'd I see all perish to a man fighting for the right!"

"I tell you I can take the ship as it is," snarled Watson, "but I do not wish to sacrifice the lives of brave men such as I know your crew is composed of."

"That they are, and brave enough to die in defense of principle. There is not a man or boy, even, among them all, who would consent to join your murderous band. As it seems to be death in either case, we prefer to die on the side of right and justice."

Watson's face grew black, and he swallowed a deep draught of the liquor brought to him, and sat for some moments in thought before speaking.

"Take him away," he muttered, at length. "Place him in the red cavern, and keep a strong guard over him until I am ready."

The two giants led Tom away, after first tying a scarf over his eyes, so that he could not see in which direction he was being taken.

When the scarf was removed, Tom found himself in a small apartment hung with red draperies, and supplied with a small table, a chair and a rude couch, and lighted by a hanging lamp.

The door was of heavy iron bars, and on the outside of this three men paced constantly up and down, there being scarcely a moment when one or another was not in sight.

"So-so," mused Tom. "I am taken but not conquered. When I do not return, Harry and my brave men will penetrate to this place, release me and destroy the pirates. My position might be worse by many degrees."

The young commander sat there absorbed in thought for more than an hour when suddenly there was the sound of bolts being drawn, and, looking up, Tom saw the door open and Watson entered the apartment.

"If you have come to renew your proposition," said Tom, coldly, "I have the same reply as before."

"I think not," said the man. "You may go," to the guards, "but remain within call."

The men passed out of sight and then Watson went to the rear of the apartment, pulled aside a part of the red draperies and revealed a small platform above which, at the height of three or four feet, was an opening in the wall, through which the night air could be felt coming in.

"Step up here and tell me what you see," said Watson, standing upon one side.

Tom ascended to the little rocky platform and looked through the opening, which was about six inches square, and two or three deep, like a loophole in some ancient fortress.

The lower side of this sloped downward, so that the vision was not obstructed, and, to his amazement, Tom beheld a little bay in which his ship had found an anchorage, and there, far below him, bathed in the moonlight, lay the ship itself.

"You see," said Watson, "I was aware of your whereabouts, and knew just when you left your vessel. This is not the only lookout I have and your every movement has been watched."

Tom said nothing, but resumed his seat, while Watson, replacing the hangings, said:

"A good marksman could easily pick off your crew, man by man, as they appeared, could he not?"

"Yes," said Tom, simply.

"And, were cannon trained to bear upon it, the ship itself could not escape?"

"No," said Tom, as briefly as before.

"You see, then, that I hold the winning cards. Do you now consent to my proposition?"

"No," said Tom, sharply, striking his fist upon the table, "not even if you could sink the ship by a single shot."

"Perhaps, in the morning, you will listen to reason," said Watson, angrily, as he strode from the apartment, and the iron door clanged behind him.

"Never!" said Tom, springing up and darting a look of defiance through the bars at his enemy.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BOATSWAIN MAKES A CAPTURE — A NEW RECRUIT IN THE PIRATE RANKS.

HAWSER and Ike Bolt, being left alone in the vaulted passage, anxiously awaited Tom's return.

They did not exchange many words, for what Tom had said as to the passage carrying the sounds uttered in it, made them cautious.

For some time they sat in silence, hearing nothing, but then some one was heard coming along the corridor singing in loud, husky tones.

"That can't be Master Tom, can it, Ike Bolt?" said Hawser.

"Hardly, mate, but let us wait and see."

"If it be one o' these bloody pirates, it's a wonder the cap'n hasn't met him."

"Maybe he has," muttered Bolt.

"If aught has happened the young cap'en then," hissed Hawser, "there'll be one less of the pirates to sit down to meals to-morrow."

"Sh! he's coming nearer," whispered Bolt. "Do you take one side o' passage and I t'other, and we'll regularly garrote Master Pirate when he comes."

The sound of the staggering footsteps and boisterous voice of the drunken pirate now came nearer, and presently he reeled against Ike Bolt, who at once seized him by the throat.

Hawser caught his arms, pinioned them to his sides, while he hissed:

"Not another word out of you, my fine feller, if you value your rotten old carcass."

"Wha's all this?" stammered the man. "Who's up to larks? Stow it, ole fel, an' gimme 'nother bottle."

"Clap a stopper on that jaw of yours or it'll be broke directly," said Bolt, tightening his hold on the pirate's throat.

The man made a gurgling sound and attempted to free himself, but the big boatswain choked all thoughts of resistance out of him in a twinkling.

"We may need this feller," untying a long sash around the pirate's waist and tying his arms together with it.

At that moment a sound as of metal being struck a heavy blow resounded through the passage.

"The cap'n is discovered!" said Bolt, excitedly. "Quick! To the boat!"

Dragging the pirate after them, the two men hurried back, and soon reached the boat, where Vere was anxiously awaiting them.

"What's up, Bolt?" cried Harry.

"Don't know, sir. We've got this one, but no one knows what's happened."

"Where is Captain Tom?"

"Went ahead, sir, to reckonorter, and then this feller came along, and then the gong rang out."

"Tom has been discovered. We must follow and rescue him."

"We have no lights, sir, and that there tunnel may have a dozen branches. Suppose we wait a bit?"

"And Tom perhaps fighting for his life!" cried Harry. "No-no! We must save him!"

"That's better done by waiting, sir," said Bolt, calmly. "Tom Drake can defend himself, and he ain't running into dangers unnecessary. He knows when to beat a retreat, but if he's took then is the time to save him. It ain't like as if we was on the sea, Mr. Harry, where there is a fair field. Here, what we wants most is strategy and cunning."

"But something must be done," cried Vere in an agony of emotion.

"I'm going to do it," muttered Bolt. "Here, strip me off this feller's garments and rig me out in 'em. They'll think I'm one o' the pirates."

Hawser produced a light and Bolt hurriedly assumed the dress of the pirate and hastened along in the direction taken by Tom.

He presently heard the sounds of a struggle, which grew louder as he advanced.

In a few moments he stumbled against something on the floor and found it to be the lantern, muffled in Captain Tom's cloak.

The heavy oaken door leading to the large cavern had been shut, but Bolt speedily discovered it and pushed it open cautiously as the sounds within suddenly ceased.

Among so many he was not detected, and, placing the lantern and cloak in a corner, he mixed in with the pirates, pretending to be drunk so as to excite the less suspicion.

He saw Tom led away but concluded to do nothing at that time, for fear of discovery.

"There's too many of 'em to whip," he mused. "Maybe I can get put on as a guard and if I can it'll be easy fixin' the rest of 'em."

He recognized Watson as having been the treacherous first officer

of the vessel in which he had formerly served when young Tom Drake was a midshipman.

"So-so, our old enemy Watson is at the head o' these cut-throats, is he?" mused Bolt. "Turned to his old trade agin, as naturally as a fish takes to water. He mustn't see me or I'll be jugged the same as the cap'n."

Now that Tom had been led away Watson ordered the men to return to their quarters, and Ike Bolt went with the others, attracting no suspicion.

The men were all more or less affected by liquor, and as Bolt was evidently a familiar figure no one thought to look too closely at him.

The giant boatswain presently found himself in a roomy cavern, furnished with a long table around which, upon benches, the buccaneers sat feasting and drinking.

"It's well I'm supposed to be drunk," mused Bolt, "for I'd like a taste o' that liquor myself, but if I started on it I'd have to keep it up and I want a clear head now on my shoulders if I ever did since I was a baby."

Now and then, indeed, the boatswain did make a pretense of drinking, but he managed to pour more wine on the floor than down his throat, and always contrived to choke just afterwards and disgorge what little he had taken.

At last he was able to retire to a corner by himself without attracting attention, and was soon curled up on a bench, apparently fast asleep.

He had never been more wide awake, however, for he felt that upon him depended the safety, perhaps the very life of his commander, and he therefore kept all his wits about him.

The feasting and drinking went on for two or three hours, one after another of the buccaneers retiring to various corners to fall unconscious, while others fell asleep where they sat, letting their hands rest on the table; others again reeling to the floor, and lying there like logs.

There was still a large number who kept up the orgies, and Bolt wondered to himself if they would ever end.

The guard would be changed eventually, he argued, and for this he waited in patience.

Securing a bottle of liquor and several pistols, taken from the inanimate freebooters, he continued to wait and at last his patience was rewarded.

It was an hour or so after midnight when a big, red-faced man, evidently a person of some authority, came into the room and said, with a string of strong expressions:

"Here, look alive, you lubbers. The guard must be changed. Get up here, three of the soberest of you, and relieve your mates."

Nobody stirred, and Ike appeared to be more sound asleep than ever.

"Here, you, Long Tom," said the big fellow, shaking Ike by the shoulder, "you were drunk before any of the rest, and now you ought to be sober."

"Ay, ay, sir; ready," growled Bolt in a gruff voice, staggering to his feet and contriving to keep his face shaded. "Long Tom is allus called fur when there's anything partic'lar."

"Well, no matter how drunk you are, you can be depended on," said the other, slapping Ike on the shoulder.

"That's so—ho, ho, that's so, hanged if it aren't, leftenant."

Two more men now joined Ike, who contrived to drop behind and let the others lead, as it might have put him in an awkward predicament to have been obliged to go ahead.

After traversing several winding passages, crossing three or four caverns of greater or less size and ascending many spiral stairways, the three men paused before a grated door, beyond which Bolt could see Tom Drake seated at a table, his head in his hands.

"There's the young tiger cat we're to watch," muttered Ike Bolt, in deep, surly tones, "and it'll be bad for us if we don't do it."

"Ay, ay, Long Tom, but nobody ever saw you miss of anything, like your old brass namesake."

"Ay, ay, lad, when I open my mouth it thunders and some un's safe to get hit."

"Brave, faithful old Bolt," thought Tom, who had heard the boatswain when he first spoke, but made no sign lest he would betray him. "So you are you are there, are you? Then delivery is not far away."

The men who had been relieved now went away, the others taking

their places, pacing up and down for a distance of forty or fifty feet, constantly passing and repassing the door.

Finally Bolt called the others aside and said in thick tones:

"Harkee, lads, there's no call for we to tramp our legs off this fashion. Let one of you post hisself by the door so as to bear on the rooms yon, and if aught happens suspicious call the rest."

"A good plan, Tom. Who'll post himself by the door?"

"I'll take the fust watch, and you can relieve me in half an hour."

"Good," and Tom stood in front of the door, while the others sat down on a rough bench a few yards away.

After standing there a few minutes. Bolt took a bottle from under his coat, and pretended to take a copious draught.

"Hi, Long Tom," whispered one of the men, "if the bottle goes with the post, I'll take your place."

"It goes wi' me, mate, but I'm not greedy. Come and take a pull at it."

Both men took a pull, and not merely one, but several before Bolt put the bottle back in his pocket.

"How comes it that you can allus get the liquor when we can't?" asked one.

"That's a secret, mate; but I'll let you have another swig, if I can't tell you how I get it."

The men did not leave off drinking till they had finished the bottle, and then staggering to the bench, they fell across it, and were soon in a profound slumber, which promised to last for many hours.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ESCAPE FROM THE CAVE—THREATENED DANGERS.

WHEN the heavy breathing of the two buccaneers told the boatswain that they were fast asleep he went to the door and said, cautiously:

"Captain Tom, are you awake?"

"That I am, my brave fellow," cried Tom, leaping to his feet and hurrying to the door. "I have not been asleep at all, Bolt, but have been waiting for the signal."

"Well, then, sir, them two brutes is like logs, and they won't wake up for hours. Next thing to do is to get you out."

"You have the keys?" asked Tom, nervously.

"Not I, sir, nor them pigs yonder neither."

"Have you a file, then?"

"Not I, Captain Tom, but I'll get you out all the same."

"Had you not better return and bring Vere and all hands? There is a window in this cell from which you can see our ship. Our movements were watched from the first."

"Then if there's one lookout there's more, you may depend on it, sir, and if all hands turns out it'll be known."

"True, Bolt, but what do you propose to do? I must be out of here and on board my ship by morning. Watson expects his answer then, and I must give it to him."

"Stop here a bit," murmured Bolt. "Red Nose, or whatever else he may be called, carries the keys. I saw them at his belt, but could not get them away. I will go find him and cudgel 'em out of him in some fashion."

Thereupon Bolt hurried away following the route by which he had come as well as he could remember, but suddenly finding himself in the open air with the moon shining down through a rift in the rocks and the sound of water not far below his feet.

"By my word, I've gone astray," he muttered. "I took the moon for a hanging lamp. However am I to get back?"

At that moment a step was heard on the platform, and a gruff voice demanded:

"Now then, drunkard, how comes it you have left your post when there is yet two hours to serve?"

The speaker was the man whom Bolt had called Red Nose, and the one who carried the keys of Captain Tom's prison.

The crafty boatswain exhibited no surprise, but formed a plan of action with the swiftness of thought.

"Come this way, leftenant," he whispered. "Here's a fine conspiracy I've discovered. The prisoner signaling to his men under our very noses."

"What have you learned?" asked the other, hurrying out upon the platform where, a few feet below, a noisy mountain stream tumbled and bubbled in the moonlight.

"This!" hissed Bolt, suddenly seizing the pirate lieutenant by the

throat, "that you aren't as clever as you think, and that Ike Bolt is a match for any man among you."

The man struggled in vain and tried to cry out, to no purpose, for Bolt's sinewy arms held him as in a vise while his strong fingers closed upon the throat of the victim and stifled all sound.

In a few minutes the unconscious form of the pirate lay in the shadow just outside the cavern, while Bolt kneeled beside him muttering:

"I won't say as he's dead, but he'll find some difficulty in breathing for a bit, and, lest he might feel like making a noise just to try his lungs, I'll have to give him this to chew on, as well as to truss him up like a foul for the spit."

Then, having bound and gagged his prisoner, Bolt took the bunch of keys from his belt, dropped them in a pocket of his coat and re-entered the cavern.

"Two hours to wait," he mused. "That's time enough. After all, it was a lucky thing I did go astray, but now I must look out and not get lost."

Hurrying on towards where a light was burning at the intersection of two passages, Bolt recognized the place as the point where he had gone astray in coming down.

"I'll have to remember this," he muttered. "It will be better than the other."

Then he hurried on, hearing no suspicious sounds and at last reaching the cell of Young Captain Tom, where matters stood as they had when he had left it.

His two companions were still fast asleep and snoring loudly, and the waggish boatswain chuckled as he looked at them and said:

"Aye, sleep on, pigs! It's not often you have the honor of keeping guard over Cap'n Tom, and so it's no wonder you don't know how to do it properly."

Then, looking through his bunch of keys and selecting one which he thought ought to fit, Bolt inserted it in the lock, calling softly to Tom.

The key was too large, however, and Tom picked out another, this being too small.

"Try that rusty one," said Tom, who was standing just within the door, watching the boatswain with eager eyes.

The rusty key was put into the lock and at that moment a loud crash was heard.

"Quick, the alarm!" cried Tom. "That must be the one."

The boatswain gave the key a quick turn and the bolt flew back as once again came that crash which has so alarmed Tom.

"That's thunder, sir," said Bolt, raising a bar and pulling at the heavy door. "Let it crash again, 'tis all the better for our work."

Once again came the crash as Bolt dragged the door open with the assistance of Tom, who pushed upon the other side.

"Which way now, Bolt?" cried young Captain Tom, as he sprang out. "Lead the way, my brave fellow."

"Stop a bit, Captain Tom. There's no bit of a hurry. It'll be better to put these pigs in the pen first, lest anything should happen."

Tom and Bolt then dragged the two sleeping sentinels into the cell and laid them on the stone floor where they slept on, unconscious of any change.

Bolt then closed and locked the iron door, dropped the keys into his pocket, and said:

"I think I've found the head of the stream that we came up, Cap'n Tom, and it'll be better to go that way out than to risk the quarters below. There's no knowing who we might meet."

"I trust everything to you, Bolt," said Tom, in a whisper. "Lead on. Ah, the storm is increasing."

"Just what we want. Here, Cap'n Tom, take these. You may need them," and Bolt handed Tom a brace of pistols.

Sticking them in his belt Tom now followed Bolt, who hurried rapidly on, retracing the path he had just taken till he reached the point where the two corridors crossed.

"This way," whispered Bolt, seizing Tom's arm as a flash of lightning illuminated the passage.

A terrible crash succeeded it, and another flash followed as the two fugitives stood without upon the rocky platform.

The sky was now obscured by heavy clouds, from out of which darted the forked lightning, while, at this moment rain began to fall in a gentle shower.

"This way," said Bolt, when the next flash came, revealing the bed of the stream, ten or fifteen feet below.

It was rather a dangerous undertaking to climb down those jagged rocks, with only the lightning to guide them, but they had both been in greater peril before now, and the thought of escape nerved them to keep on.

They reached the bed of the stream at last, and, stepping boldly into the water, which reached scarcely to their knees, waded across and stepped upon a ledge similar to the one they had seen in the underground passage.

"This is our stream, without doubt, Cap'n Tom," said Bolt, as a brilliant flash illuminated the scene. "Did you see, below there, where it enters the hill?"

"Yes," said Tom, "but we must hasten before the—"

Bolt did not hear the rest of the sentence, for the words were drowned in the awful crash which followed the lightning, the earth seeming to shake beneath it.

"Hurry!" muttered Tom, leading the way, and dashing along the smooth path by the side of the tumbling stream.

It seemed to be raining somewhat more severely than at first, and Bolt supposed that Tom's anxiety to push on was caused by his not wishing to get wet.

"It's unfortunate I had to leave your cloak and the lantern behind, Cap'n Tom, but if we'd gone out that way we wouldn't've needed 'em, so there it is again."

"Yes—yes; but let us lose no time," cried Tom. "I am more afraid of—"

Again his words were lost in the crash that followed, but in another minute he and Bolt had passed into a vaulted chamber through which the stream made its way, and were safe from the rain.

"It's the very same stream, Cap'n Tom, that we rowed into down by the little bay," said Bolt, "and it'll carry us right down to where Master Harry and the men is waiting for us. This have been a busy night for we, sir."

"Ay, Bolt; and I am not sure that we are safe from our troubles yet. Ha! what was that?"

"Only the rain!" growled Bolt. "It's coming a bit heavier now."

"Only the rain!" repeated Tom. "Hasten on for your life, man, for if the rain increases we shall presently see this stream transformed to a flood, which may sweep us to our doom!"

CHAPTER VIII.

PURSUED BY THE FLOOD—A NEW PERIL.

"HURRY on, Bolt; the water is rising fast."

Young Captain Tom and Ike Bolt had followed the underground stream for a hundred yards, the ledge on which they walked alternately rising and falling, being now level with the stream and then high above it, when a sudden rushing sound caused Tom to utter a hasty warning to his companion.

The beating of the rain could now be heard distinctly, and it was evidently pouring down in torrents by the sound.

Occasionally a few drops would fall upon them from above, probably through some chink in the roof of the cavern, and now and then the sound would be much plainer than at others, as though the roof were open to the sky.

What Tom had tried to tell Bolt before they entered the passage, was that he feared that if the rain increased to any degree the stream would be so swollen as to flood the cave.

There certainly appeared to be reasonable grounds for such a belief as now, with that rushing sound, a perfect flood of waters swept beneath them, carrying with it sticks, stones, and all sorts of rubbish.

"Hurry, Bolt!" cried Tom, again, "we must find a higher place than this. The water is above our ankles now."

The place was as dark as the pit, for the lightning no longer shone in, and the only guide was the rocky wall along which they hurried.

With a rush and a roar the foaming torrent swept upon them, and both would have been borne away had they not just then reached a point where the path sloped rapidly upward, ending at last in a broad ledge ten feet above the flood.

Here they paused while Tom strained his eyes to see if there might be a higher point beyond.

"Can you make a light, Bolt?" the young commander shouted, the noise of the rushing waters being almost deafening.

He was obliged to repeat the question, shouting it in the boatswain's ear before he could make himself heard.

"Can't do it, Cap'n Tom," answered Bolt. "Left the tinder-box in my other togs, back in the boat."

"Then fire a pistol; that may give us light sufficient."

In a few moments Bolt discharged one of his pistols, firing toward the rushing water.

The light was not very brilliant, nor of long duration, but it served to show them that the water was rising rapidly; that they were upon the highest point of the ledge, and that just behind and above them was a narrow shelf, eight or ten feet long, and that above this a huge mass of rock jutted out, reaching nearly across the stream, and then rising to a great height, sheer above them.

"The water is rising," said Tom, and even as he spoke there was another wild rush of foaming waves, and he and Bolt were submerged to their waists.

Only by pressing their bodies firmly against the rocky wall did they escape being swept away by the flood.

After the first rush, the water subsided, and only reached to their knees; but after that it began to rise again more steadily, and before long it was up to their breasts.

"We must get upon the shelf behind us and lie down," said Tom, the sound of the water being less deafening. "The rush of the water is something awful, and we know not at what moment we may be swept away."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n Tom," said Bolt. "Climb up, get a good place, and then give me your hand."

"We must be quick about it, Bolt, for when we no longer stick together, the danger is greater."

"Aye, aye, sir. Say when you're ready, sir, and I'll boost you up."

"Ready it is, Bolt! Now!"

Upon the instant the boatswain lifted Tom in his great arms, and threw him upon the ledge above.

At that moment another great wave swept into the cave, and Bolt uttered a cry of alarm.

"Where are you, Bolt?" screamed Tom, in affright. "Oh, my God, the brave fellow is lost!"

"No, no, Cap'n Tom. I'm safe, but it was by a narrer shave," muttered the other, in broken tones.

Tom stretched forth his hand and touched his companion's shaggy head, a deep feeling of relief coming over him as Bolt asked:

"Room enough where you are, sir?"

"Yes, Bolt, and you?"

"Oh, I'm only a bit cramped, but then I'm such a long stick that it's no easy matter to stow me away any place you may find."

"I can make a little room for you, my man, and then you can lie more easy."

Tom then moved along for about a foot, but here his feet came in contact with the rock and he stopped.

"How will that do, Bolt?" he asked. "Room enough?"

"Well, I have more than I had, and I guess it don't matter much if I do lie spoon fashion a bit. It's fort'nate that the shelf is wide if it ain't very high."

For a time, at least, the fugitives were safe, and unless the water filled the cavern to the roof, there seemed to be no danger of their drowning, even though it might reach the shelf where they were lying.

Neither spoke a word for many minutes, but at last Bolt said:

"It's just below our shelf now, Cap'n Tom. I can dip my hand in it."

"So can I; but do you think it runs so swiftly?"

"Reckon not, cap'n. I say!"

"Well?"

"It isn't likely we'll find the boat below there when the flood goes down?"

"Scarcely, but Vere will be waiting for us at the entrance."

"Maybe so," muttered Bolt, and nothing more was said for a long time.

"My word, Cap'n Tom," cried Bolt suddenly, after a long silence, "the flood is going down. I can't reach it like I could before."

"Listen and try if you can hear the storm outside."

"No, I can hear nothing."

"Then it must have ceased. These tropical storms are as sudden as they are violent, and pass away as quickly as they come on. The

surplus water in the stream will soon run off now that the supply is gone, and before long we can continue our march."

Tom was right, for the water lowered very rapidly, and in ten minutes they were able to stand dry shod upon the lower ledge, which was perfectly clean and free of mud or other deposits.

"No wonder the ledge and the bowlders are so smooth like," grunted Bolt. "With all that water running through, they ought to be like glass."

Finding that the water was entirely off the ledge, even where it skirted the very edge of the stream, Tom and Bolt now pushed on, rapidly but carefully, and soon Tom noticed a ray of light ahead of them.

This proved to enter through a chink in the roof, and, further on there was another, several inches wide and many feet in length, the sky being seen above it.

"The day has broken, Bolt," said Tom, "and it is time we were out of this hole."

They pushed on more rapidly now, having an abundance of light, and presently they reached the landing where they had left the boat on the previous night.

"What shall we do now, boatswain?" asked young Captain Tom.

"I might sound my pipe as a signal," returned Tom. "Of course they couldn't stop in here with all that water rushing through, nor would they care to get into the cave where the pirates is, but I opine they've been watching the mouth pretty close."

"Yes, but it is light now and they may fear to be seen."

"Then you may be sure Mr. Harry will come back with all the men he can get and drive right through to the very middle o' this nest o' cut-throats."

"Sound your pipe, Bolt," said Tom.

Bolt blew a blast on his whistle and it was immediately answered from the mouth of the passage by:

"Tom Drake ahoy! Are you there?"

"Ay, ay, and safe, though you scarcely know the dangers I have been through."

Then the sound of oars was heard and in a few moments the boat rowed alongside and they jumped aboard.

"Why, Ike Bolt, you old pirate," cried Hawser, "wherever have you been all the night and never sent for me to come and give you a lift."

"Ho-ho, matey," said Bolt, "I guess if you had been in that hole when the water came rushing through, you'd have wanted a lift yourself; don't you think so, cap'n?"

"Pull back to the ship, Harry," said Tom. "There is work for us yet, perhaps the necessity of getting out of our own danger before we think of putting this pirate into another."

In a few minutes they rowed out into the little bay, when Tom started up in surprise, pointing to the pirate schooner which now lay at anchor where they had seen her the day before.

"When did the schooner return?" he asked Harry.

"She has come in since we entered the passage. She was not there before."

"To your oars, men!" cried Tom. "We are discovered."

This was true enough, for at the next instant a shot went whizzing through the air, sent by one of the pirate's guns, struck the cliff just a few feet above the boat and rebounded, falling into the water with a loud splash.

"Pull for your lives!" hissed Tom. "That shot struck high, but the next will not go so wide of its mark. Pull away before they can get our range."

The men bent to their oars with a will, and the boat fairly flew through the water, Tom at the helm and Harry watching anxiously for the next move on board the schooner.

A second shot came screaming after them, striking the water just astern of the boat and plunging to the bottom.

The men pulled as they had never pulled before, and had just reached the mouth of the bay when Harry said in a loud but excited tone:

"They are lowering the boats so as to give us chase."

"Row hearty, my bullies," said Tom. "Let the ruffians come on if they wish. Once on board our brave ship and we will give them as warm a reception as they wish."

By this time they were out in the open water between the reefs and the island, and were pulling towards the opening while at the same

time three boats shot around into sight from behind the schooner and gave chase, the men yelling like demons.

CHAPTER IX.

MATTERS GROW UNPLEASANT FOR MR. WATSON.

ON swept the boat, Young Captain Tom encouraging his men to do their best, while after it came the pirates trying their utmost to catch the brave young commander and his comrades.

Our hero had the advantage and meant to keep it, for as soon as he entered the harbor where his ship lay he knew that he could keep back the pirates with but little trouble.

One of the pursuing boats shot ahead of the rest, and commanding this was a fierce looking man all in red, with a beard as black as night.

"They haven't found where we put Red Nose yet," muttered Ike Bolt, "or there might be more trouble than there seems likely to be."

The man in the pirate boat was constantly yelling to his men to row faster, and presently he arose, drew a huge pistol and fired it in the direction of the escaping boat.

The bullet whizzed past Tom's head, and he instantly turned and answered the shot with such telling effect that the man in red suddenly uttered a groan and fell to the bottom of the boat.

This delayed their progress, as the rowers became confused and could not pull an even stroke.

The three boats now came on together, and a scattered firing now began, several bullets striking the oars, some falling short, and others whizzing by without causing any damage.

By this time the Viking's boat was beyond the reef, and pulling steadily toward the entrance of the little harbor.

Suddenly the sound of a cannon from the schooner's direction was heard, and the boats put back soon afterwards.

Tom hurried on, entered the harbor, and found his ship lying safe at anchor just where he had left her the night before.

He hastened on board, and was welcomed with a shout by his brave men, who had been anxiously awaiting his return.

"We must have up the anchor at once, Harry," said Tom. "If what Watson says is true, I have no desire to have my best men picked off by his marksmen," and Tom hurriedly related what had taken place between him and the pirate.

"Then Watson is at his old trade again," he muttered, as he hurried off to give the necessary orders. "No wonder that he has no love for Tom, particularly after the long chase we have just given him."

The men were hard at work getting up the anchor, when several sharp reports were heard, and a shower of bullets whizzed around the heads of the busy sailors.

A few puffs of smoke from the cliff told the story, and it was evident that the alarm had been given.

"Pay no attention to that as yet," said Tom, "and keep in the shelter as much as you can. This is simply done to take off our attention from other matters."

"Perhaps the pirates think they can bring the schooner around here and shut us in," said Harry.

"Exactly, and that is what I wish to prevent. We can fight them better on the open sea than here, and I want to destroy them utterly."

At this moment another volley came from the cliffs and one poor fellow was struck in the head and killed.

"Hawser," said Tom quietly, "train a gun upon that upper loophole and let them have it."

"Aye, aye, sir," replied the man, and presently, as another volley was fired, he clapped a blazing coal on the vent of his piece and jumped back to watch the effect of his shot.

Boom!

There was a roar, a high shot went flying upwards, struck the cliff and disappeared.

"Well aimed!" cried Tom. "Give 'em another one like that, Hawser. This is a game that two can play at, as our friends will find."

"Avast heaving!" cried Ike Bolt. "Tacks and sheets there! Hoist away."

In a few moments the gallant ship began to move slowly through the water as the canvas was spread, and now there came another volley from above, two or three of the men on the yards being hit.

"I'll soon stop that," cried Hawser, and he sent another shot towards the cliff, aiming at one of the lower loopholes.

The huge missile struck fairly, and what seemed to be a great mass of rock toppled and fell into the water, leaving exposed the interior of a small apartment, where several men were seen hurrying away in alarm.

"Aha! The fellow's battlements are but a sham!" cried Tom. "That was only a wooden cliff. Fire again and give 'em a broadside!"

The order was soon obeyed, and the ship trembled with the concussion that followed.

One other sham buttress was carried away, while here and there the rocks showed the marks of the heavy shot where loose masses went crashing into the sea.

Watson had evidently, at considerable trouble, built these lookouts at different points, constructing them so that they appeared to be parts of the great rock itself, canvas and paint helping out the deception.

The man had never expected to be bombarded in that position, thinking that no one would attempt such an apparently impossible undertaking.

That first shot of Hawser's which had crashed into the room occupied by Tom a few hours before had suggested the idea to our hero that perhaps he might silence the sharp-shooters after all, with the surprising result already given.

"That will do," laughed Tom. "A few more shots and we would have the whole cliff come tumbling about our ears."

Not long after that the Viking glided out of the harbor into open water, caught a favoring wind and headed straight for the great expanse beyond.

When they reached the further side of the reefs it was seen that the schooner was evidently preparing for either flight or a desperate encounter with her determined foes.

At first she headed directly for the reefs, but suddenly scuttled away in another direction as if trying to escape.

A shot from the Viking struck down two or three of her men, and another tore a huge rent in her fore sail.

She replied in a like manner, but the shots failed to do any mischief on board the Viking.

Then as she ran along the line of reefs inside, and headed for the southern channel, the ship followed on the outside, keeping just abreast and sending volley after volley whistling through her rigging, cutting into her sails and creating general havoc.

"I guess we're the first genniwine frigate she's ever tackled," grunted Hawser, as he swabbed out one of his guns he had just discharged, "and they ain't a bit used to it."

"No, that feller Watson likes pouncing down upon po or trading vessels, killing all hands, ripping out the cargo, and then settin' fire to 'em," added Bolt. "This sort o' thing ain't to his liking."

In fact Tom had attacked his old enemy in a most determined manner, and he would have liked nothing better than to come to close quarters with the pirate and crush him at once.

It mattered not that Watson was a personal enemy of his, for it was the man's evil trade that Tom was at war against, and one pirate was no more to him than another.

With the men it was otherwise, for many of them had known Watson and suffered from his many acts of tyranny, and to them his defeat would be satisfying their own personal vengeance.

It was evident now that the buccaneer seemed to realize that the Viking was too powerful for him to cope with, either at a distance or in close encounter, and that he was doing his best to disable his enemy temporarily, so as to the better make his own escape.

Suddenly clapping on all sail, however, the pirate captain headed his vessel for the further end of the reefs where the channel was much more difficult to follow than at the point where the Viking's boat had entered.

This move was a wise one upon the pirate's part, for Tom was obliged to stand off in order to clear a number of smaller reefs beyond the main line, and by the time he had sailed free of these the schooner had obtained a long lead and seemed likely to hold it.

Tom was determined not to let the rascal escape, even though he had to chase him all over the Gulf, and he followed with the same tenacity of purpose which had marked his every act during the long chase.

"We'll come up with her yet," remarked Ike Bolt. "Young Cap'n

Tom ain't the man to give up anything when he once makes up his mind to it, and you can't flood him out or shell him out, or knock him out of it in any shape, and that's the kind of a man to stick by."

CHAPTER X.

THE CHASE AND CAPTURE OF THE SPIDER.

FILLED with the purpose of overtaking the pirate, Young Captain Tom crowded on all the sail his ship would carry, and steadily pursued the schooner all that day.

The buccaneers gained foot by foot, the wind being more favorable to them than to Tom Drake.

Night came, and Tom was still in pursuit; morning dawned, and there was the pirate, just in sight, and keeping steadily upon her way.

All day the chase continued, and at nightfall a strong wind arose, which carried the ship along at an increased rate of speed.

The sky was overcast, but at long intervals the moon would come out for a few moments, and the schooner could be seen in the distance, doing her utmost to escape.

At daybreak the next morning the schooner was seen, making toward a group of islands surrounded by reefs, among which it was her evident intention to thread her way, and thus secure a greater lead upon her pursuer.

The wind was still favorable to the ship, and Tom had great hope of overhauling the freebooters before many hours.

In the middle of the forenoon watch the wind suddenly died out completely, and left both vessels becalmed.

The schooner was still five miles away from the islands, and Tom smiled as he saw her lying there devoid of motion.

"You cannot escape and we cannot get to you, as yet," he murmured. "If it were only night now."

The calm lasted all day, and there seemed to be no chance of a change, even after night came on.

The schooner had taken in all her canvas, and did not show any lights, so that it was impossible to make her out upon the water and in that uncertain light, the moon not having yet arisen.

As soon as it was fairly dark, Tom called Harry into the cabin and said:

"I have had all our lights set so as to deceive this fellow, but I am not going to remain idle, for all that."

"The pirates may attempt to tow their vessel into safer quarters under cover of the darkness, for they will not endeavor to surprise us, I am certain."

"What I propose to do, however, is to move upon them at once, so as to prevent their escaping."

"I shall take every boat and every man that can be spared and attack them before they know it."

"A good plan," said Harry. "Our old friend, Watson, will be glad to see us."

Shortly afterwards the boats were lowered one by one, the utmost care being taken that no unnecessary noise was made.

A small cannon was placed in the bow of each, and the men were all armed with a brace of pistols and plenty of ammunition, besides being provided with cutlasses and dirks.

The schooner's bearings had been carefully taken before, so that Tom was as well aware of her present position as though it were broad daylight.

There were six boats, and fifty brave fellows manned them, being led by Tom, Harry, two of the mates, Ike Bolt and Hawser.

The oars were muffled, and the men had strict orders not to make any noise if it could possibly be avoided.

One after another they left the ship, stretching out in a long line so as to avoid observation.

Steadily and cautiously the men rowed on in the darkness, which seemed to increase as the time went on.

At the end of an hour Tom could make out the form of the schooner not far ahead, and he ordered his men to cease rowing and allow the others to come up.

"If they have thought of towing their vessel away they have evidently not begun operations yet," he mused. "I would like to have their boats down, for then our work would be easier."

In a few minutes the boat headed by Harry Vere came up, and Tom reported the situation to his lieutenant.

When all the boats were together Tom gave the order to start and outlined the plan of attack.

As they drew nearer, the schooner being now but a hundred feet distant, there was a sudden alarm on board and hurried voices and the tramping of feet were heard.

"We are discovered!" cried Tom. "Forward and attack them on all sides."

The boats shot through the water and in a few minutes two score brave fellows were clambering up the sides of the pirate vessel.

The buccaneers came swarming up from below, with loud cries, and a fierce conflict began at once.

Muskets and pistols flashed, swords rang together, and a terrible din ensued.

Tom rallied his men together that there might be no mistakes made in the darkness and then the battle began in earnest.

By the light of the flashing pistols the fight could be seen to be waging furiously, the pirates being now driven back and then rallying and charging their enemies desperately.

In the midst of it all the moon arose, blood red, from the ocean, and now the struggle went on with terrible bitterness.

At last, being driven to the bows where they huddled together like a flock of frightened sheep, the pirates began to murmur and show signs of giving up the fight.

"If we had had Blackton to lead us," muttered one, "we would not have been driven back like this."

"Aye, if we had," growled another, "but he thought more of himself than of us, the traitor."

"Let us not longer keep up the mad struggle. We shall all be killed in the end."

"Surrender!" cried Captain Tom, pausing, with his men gathered just behind him. "Surrender while there is yet time."

"We yield," cried the man in red whom they had seen on the morning of the escape of the schooner, and who seemed now to be the leader instead of Watson.

The latter had not been seen during the entire fight, and Tom and Harry both wondered if he had been killed during the first attack before the moon arose.

"Throw down your arms, if you surrender," cried Tom, "and pass one by one into the waist."

"You will spare our lives?" asked the leader.

"We shall certainly not allow you to escape scot free," said Tom, "but not one of you will be harmed while he is aboard this vessel."

"He means to deliver us up to be hanged," growled one. "We might better die fighting than perish that way. Forward, lads! While there is life there is hope."

"Stop!" roared Tom, brandishing his sword. "If you resist now we will not cease till every man of you is cut down."

"Then let us die together!" yelled the buccaneers, as they rushed upon their enemies.

A fierce fight ensued, but the Viking's crew outnumbered that of the schooner now, and the pirates were soon beaten down, disarmed and made prisoners.

They were confined in the hold, and then, as a slight breeze had arisen, sail was made upon the schooner, and she was taken back to the ship, the latter's boats towing behind.

Tom went into his own cabin as soon as he reached the Viking and sent for the pirate leader, who was led in heavily ironed.

"You were not always the commander of the schooner?" asked Tom, motioning to the man to sit down.

"No," was the answer.

"Where is Watson, whom I saw in the cavern?"

"I know no such man."

"You may have another name for him," said Tom, "but you know whom I mean. It was he who struck upon the shield in the cavern, and summoned the men to his aid; the same with whom I fought."

"That is Blackton," said the other. "He is our chief."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know," said the other, doggedly.

"My man," said Tom, firmly, "if you do not answer my questions promptly, and give me all the information I seek, I will have you hanged in five minutes."

"I do not know where Blackton is," replied the other. "He did not leave the island when we did. The schooner was run out in order

to lead you astray. Then we were to return, but you followed us too closely for that."

"Watson remained on the island?"

"Yes, with a dozen men. When your escape was reported to him, he signaled to me to try and cut out your ship, and then, when you had prevented that, to pretend to leave, so as to lead you astray."

"And you have been in command ever since?"

"Yes."

"You expected to return, you say?"

"Yes, but the fates were against me."

"Watson was the leader, the recognized chief of your band?"

"Yes, since Redbeard's death."

"And he has destroyed many ships?"

"He has, and taken many lives and much plunder."

"That is enough," and Tom called two sailors and had the pirate taken back to the hold.

"So-so, the brave Watson has escaped me after all," muttered Tom. "He knew better than to meet me again, for he knew that I had sworn to crush him. It is like the man to let another meet the fate he knew was in store for him. Still on the island, then? Well, I know where it is and I will yet hunt him down."

The two vessels sailed in company that night, very little progress being made, but, in the morning, Tom called Vere and said:

"I think that you had better take command of the Spider, as this prize of ours is named, and take half a dozen good fellows and Bolt with you, as a crew. We might become separated, and if we do, you must take the schooner into port. I will return to the island and rejoin you later."

"Why can we not both go to the island? There may be more fighting, and I would not like to miss it."

"We will do so, but, in case a storm comes up and you lose sight of me, keep right on and take the vessel into port, and wait for me there."

"I'll do it, Tom, but I hope that we shall not be separated, for I would very much like to see Watson when you capture him. That was a wily trick of his, and if he has another schooner, I doubt if you will find him on the island when you reach it."

"He is waiting for the schooner to return, after throwing us off the scent," said Tom, with a laugh.

"Or, at least, you think he is," said Vere, "but we know Watson to be a coward and a sneak, and it would not surprise me if he had found some means to leave the island ere this."

"Perhaps," said Tom, thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XI.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN A FATAL MISTAKE.

HARRY VERE took command of the schooner immediately after breakfast, and the two vessels sailed in company that day.

The captured pirates were in irons in the hold, and were kept under close surveillance, as they were dangerous fellows, and were one to free himself the consequences might be disastrous.

With Vere as master, Ike Bolt as mate and a crew of six lusty sailors the vessel could easily be managed, in bad weather even, the greatest danger to be apprehended being that the pirates might escape.

However, the prize crew were all brave fellows and every precaution was taken to prevent such a thing from happening, though if it did they could all be relied upon to fight to the death.

During the night succeeding Vere's taking command, a gale sprang up and, as Tom had anticipated, the two vessels had become separated.

In the morning nothing was to be seen of the Viking, and, as soon as the sun came out, which was not until nearly noon, Harry took an observation, ascertained his position and set sail for port, as already arranged.

Nothing occurred that day, nor was anything seen of the Viking, affairs going on now in regular order as though Harry had always been in command.

On the day following, during the morning watch, one of the sailors reported the appearance of an armed brig in the offing.

Ike Bolt went aloft, scanned the stranger through the glass, and then coming down, said carelessly:

"Looks like the tub that upstart Clifford is on. Guess he's still huntin' for pirates."

Harry said nothing, but when the brig came nearer she hoisted American flag and signaled to the schooner to lie to.

"That's more of his buncombe," said Harry impatiently. "I suppose he wants to put us under his orders."

"Shall we show our colors, sir?" asked Ike. "'Tain't no disgrace to show the stars and stripes."

"Yes, Bolt, do so, by all means. You will probably find the national colors in the flag chest. These fellows carry all sorts, so as to be ready for any emergency."

Bolt rummaged about in the cabin, and finally discovered what he was in search of, pulling out several flags and taking the Stars and Stripes from the lot.

Seeing the black flag with the skull and cross bones in the field, he dashed it on the floor, put his foot on it, and muttered:

"That cussed rag won't fly at the peak of this here vessel again, I'm thinking."

The national colors were soon hoisted from the peak, the schooner pursuing her way as before.

This did not seem to satisfy the captain of the brig, however, for he put his vessel on a tack which would intercept the schooner and signaled for her to lie to.

"Confound his meddlesome impudence," muttered Vere, impatiently. "I am not going to stop for every popinjay that flies our flag. Keep her on the same course, Bolt. We have the right of way, and I'm going to keep it."

Not long after this the brig fired a shot which came dangerously near the schooner's head.

"Oh, I say, this is too much!" cried Vere. "By George! he seems in earnest. I wonder if we have run across another pirate?"

The brig did, indeed, seem to be in earnest, for she suddenly altered her course so as to bear straight down upon the schooner, at the same time opening fire upon her with all her bow guns.

"I don't know what to do," muttered Vere. "I won't resist if she's an American, but if she is a pirate—by George, no wonder! Look at that!"

Bolt followed the direction of Vere's hand and, looking up, saw the black flag floating from the peak.

"Haul that rag down!" stormed Harry, in a rage. "Who put it there? If this is a joke, Mr. Bolt—"

"Take my oath, sir, I ran up the Stars and Stripes!" cried Bolt, running to the signal halliards and dragging down the accursed bunting.

"Then there is treachery afoot. The pirates have escaped!" gasped Harry, as white as death. "Search the cabin, search the ship, and shoot down the first stranger you meet!"

It was a time of awful peril, for they knew not at what instant the buccaneers might come swarming upon them.

The hatches were already secured, and now the men fastened the forecastle doors, while three robust fellows with pistols in their hands followed Vere to the cabin.

"Run up our own colors, Union down," cried Vere. "This fellow will at least help us in our danger, since he is so ready to show his authority."

Then the brave young fellow dashed into the cabin, ready to fire at the first unfamiliar face.

Not a soul was seen there, however, and Harry began to feel anxious.

"Search every room!" he hissed. "Some one of the pirates has escaped, for I know that not one of you would have done so dastardly a deed."

The men hurried from room to room, while Harry stood in the main cabin ready to shoot the first stranger who appeared.

The men soon reappeared and reported that the rooms had been thoroughly searched, and that it was impossible that any one could be concealed in any of them.

At that juncture there was the sound of great confusion on deck, and something was heard to fall with a crash.

"There goes our foretop mast," cried Bolt, rushing down the companion-way. "Found any one yet, sir?"

"No. Have they appeared on deck?"

"Not a soul, but that ass of a captain of that brig is making ducks and drakes of our sticks. We've got the distress signal hoisted, but he pays no attention—. I say," suddenly pausing, "did you shut up that signal chest, sir? I'll swear I left it open when I chucked the black rag on the floor."

"Stand by!" cried Harry suddenly. "Throw back the lid, Bolt, and the rest of you fire the instant any one appears. The scoundrel is hidden there."

Upon the instant the lid of the chest was thrown back, but not by Bolt, and a boy, white with terror, kneeled within, and cried passionately:

"My God! gentlemen, do not shoot me! I was made to do it."

"Who are you?" asked Harry, lowering his weapon.

"Paul Seaton, an English boy—a slave to these wretches."

"Were you confined in the hold with the rest?"

"Yes, but not in irons. I hid away when the fighting began that night and remained there till the prisoners were brought down."

es, yes, and then—but tell me, at once, are any of the scoundrels at liberty?"

"Not yet, but they have a file and to-night—"

"Enough for the present. I will spare your life, but you must not return to the hold. You will have to be locked up."

"Oh, sir, I promise not to go down there again!" cried the boy wringing his hands, "only do not—"

"They're sending over a lot of boats, sir," cried one of the sailors, coming half way down the companionway, "and Cap'n Clifford is in one of 'em."

"Bring this boy on deck," said Harry, hurrying up the steps.

The firing had ceased and half a dozen boats were now seen coming toward the schooner.

Vere sprang upon the quarterdeck, trumpet in hand, and shouted:

"Is that the Vigilant, commanded by one Clifford?"

"Ay, ay!" shouted Clifford himself. "Board her, my men, and spare none."

"Captain Clifford," returned Harry, "you have made a mistake. This is a prize, manned by Yankee sailors."

The pompous young commander made no reply and in a few minutes boarded the schooner with his men, no resistance being offered.

"Your sword, sir," he said to Vere, as he stepped on the quarterdeck.

"What right have you to demand it?" cried Harry, flushing.

"You are a pirate, a traitor, and I demand your sword."

"I am neither, and this schooner, captured by Captain Tom Drake, the younger, four days ago, is in my charge."

"How comes it that you are flying the black flag if you are not a pirate?"

"An act of treachery, fortunately discovered in time. I feared we were in peril from the wretches confined below, who, it seems, were plotting to escape."

"That sounds very well," said Clifford, in the most lofty manner, "but a court of inquiry will probably sift the matter to the bottom, and meanwhile consider yourself under arrest. I will send a crew over and—"

"Captain Clifford," said Vere hotly, "naval etiquette forbids me to call you a fool, a conceited jackanapes, and an impudent meddler, but it does not prevent me from telling you that you are abusing your privileges, and going far beyond your rights in this matter. Pray, oblige me by retiring to your own vessel."

Clifford's face was livid, and stamping his foot angrily, he said, in the fiercest tones:

"I will have you cashiered for this, you puppy! Remember that in insulting me, you insult your country's flag."

"I have not fired upon my country's flag, at any rate," returned Harry, coolly, "and I remember that you have done so, and at a time when it was raised in signal of distress. I have nothing more to say, sir. Please relieve me of your presence."

Clifford was furious, but Harry's coolness was not to be broken down, once he had collected himself.

"I shall report you at the admiralty," said the discomfited captain, as he retreated to his boat.

"The fool!" muttered Harry, as the boats pulled away. "Tom Drake had to give him a lesson in politeness once, but it does not seem to have been remembered. I wish Tom had been here to see how he hauled in his horns, the idiot."

The damage to the spars was soon repaired, and meanwhile Harry questioned the boy, Paul Seaton, while Bolt went below with two men to investigate there as well.

One man was found to have had his shackles nearly filed apart, but, fortunately, that was all.

"It was the luckiest thing, anyhow, that that fellow did overhaul us after all," muttered Bolt, "for if he hadn't these rats would ha' been all loose to-night and nibblin' at all our throats. I was never glad to see that puppy Clifford afore, but bless me if his turnin' up this time wasn't a blessin' in disguise."

CHAPTER XII.

YOUNG CAPTAIN TOM RETURNS HOME.

AFTER the trouble with Clifford had ended Harry Vere called the boy Paul Seaton into the cabin and requested him to make a full statement of what had occurred.

"I have been with the pirates nearly a year," he said, "having been taken from a bark where I was cabin boy; three or four of the sailors joining the pirates, while the rest were killed and the vessel plundered."

"Captain Blackton spared me because I was such a little fellow, and then, he wanted a boy to wait upon him, and as there was no white cabin boy, only a negro lad, he took me."

"I was on board when the ship attacked us first, just after we sank that other bark, and I hoped then that we would be taken, for I hated the life of a pirate and wished to get away."

"When we ran into the bay at the pirate island I went ashore with the captain, but afterward stole away, swam out to the vessel, and hid myself, as I heard that the Spider was going to lead the ship on a wrong scent."

"I did not show myself, for I was afraid of the lieutenant and of the men, but I hoped that we would be taken, as then I could leave this life and be an honest boy once more."

"After we were captured I did not have an opportunity to go on deck, and was discovered by the pirates, who threatened me with all sorts of dreadful things if I did not do as they commanded me."

"I stole on deck in the night and tried to get them files, weapons and ammunition, but did not succeed until the second or third day."

"Thus, when the brig was espied, the pirates told me to get more files and to run up the black flag if I could, threatening to kill me if I did not."

"I dared not disobey, for I knew what horrible things they were capable of, and at the same time I knew what would be my fate if I were caught by your men doing such a treacherous thing."

"I succeeded in pulling down the colors and running up the black flag in the confusion which followed the firing, and then, having no chance to return to the hold, hid myself in the signal chest where I was discovered as you know."

"And a lucky thing you were," muttered Harry. "I don't know what I am going to do with you, my lad. You have done us a service and, at the same time, you might have done us a great injury."

"I know it," said the boy, hanging his head.

"What you ought to have done was to come to me at once after the men were put below, and told me your story."

"I was afraid," was the boy's reply.

"Never be afraid to do what is right, my lad," said Harry, kindly. "It is easier in the end."

"Perhaps you had better keep me locked up till we reach some port," said Paul, naively, "for I am terribly afraid of those wretches, and they might make me do something else to injure you."

"You will have no need to go near them," said Vere, "for I shall expect you to remain in the cabin to wait on me."

"Then you will trust me?" cried the boy joyfully.

"Yes."

"You don't know how much I thank you for that," cried Paul, seizing Vere's hand in both of his. "I was afraid you would not trust me after what has happened."

"Yes, my lad, for you are not the bad fellow those scoundrels below would have made you, and we have need of all the good men we can get just at present."

The pirates were now confined more closely than before, being separated into several parties, neither of which had any opportunity of communicating with each other, thus lessening the chances of success in case of a conspiracy.

The vessel then proceeded easily, distancing the brig, which was lost sight of during the night.

At the end of two days they were overhauled by the Viking and all hands were delighted to see each other once more.

"Did you catch Watson?" asked Harry, when he and Young Captain Tom met on the Viking's quarter deck.

"No. The villain had escaped in a small boat, doubtless, as the evidences of a hurried flight were easily visible."

"You found no one on the island?"

"Not a soul, and much treasure had been taken away, though not as much as I secured, probably."

"You secured a treasure?"

"Thousands and thousands of dollars' worth, my boy. Some was in the cave, but I found the greater part of it buried in the sand at low water mark."

"How did you find it?"

"Quite by accident. There was a heavy gale, and the beach in the little bay was washed away in parts, and one of the treasure chests uncovered. Then we rigged up tackles and secured a dozen in all, filled with gold, silver and jewels."

"A lucky find."

"Yes, and now the pirates' home is desolate, and will never be occupied by them again."

"What do you mean?"

"The cave is destroyed. I blew it up with gunpowder."

"But Watson, our old enemy, still lives?"

"I do not know, though, as he seems to have as many lives as a cat, he very likely is yet alive and preparing to make trouble for somebody. However, his band is broken up and it is hardly probable that he will appear in his old quarters for many years."

"Well, we have accomplished many things, and we ought to be satisfied. By the way, I have had an adventure myself," and Harry related his experience with Clifford and the narrow escape from being surprised by the pirates.

Both vessels now sailed in company, the greater part of the prisoners being transferred to the Viking, where their chance of escape was small indeed.

Young Captain Tom arrived home at last, where the captured schooner and her crew were turned over to the government.

The pirates were hanged, the schooner sold, and the recovered treasure divided between the government and Captain Tom, the crew receiving liberal shares, amounting in many cases, where the men were frugal, to a considerable fortune.

Clifford returned a week or so later than Tom Drake, without having made a single capture, and was promptly relieved of his command, his outrageous conduct having been made known to those in authority, though neither Tom nor Harry were the informants.

Once more the brave fellows embraced their loving wives, and the long list of their adventures was now swollen by their latest addition.

The boy, Paul Seaton, rescued from the pirates, attached himself to Harry, and was as faithful as a dog, giving promise of becoming a capable fellow some day.

Nothing was heard of Watson, but Tom was satisfied, and was ready to enter upon any other adventure that offered, and perhaps some day we may relate his further fortunes.

[THE END.]

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